

Editorial

Braveheart Theology

It seems to me that pundits have missed an essential point with regard to the controversial film *The Passion of the Christ*. The two main questions have been: how accurate to the New Testament is the film, and, to what extent is it anti-Semitic? But in an important way, these questions blur into one another, and are in fact the same question.

Now, the film concentrates on several themes which lend themselves to an anti-Semitic reading. The cruelty and indifference of the crowd, all of whom are Jewish, is a constant feature. And Satan walks through the Jewish crowd with little attempt at differentiation. Then there is the protracted attempt to get Pilate off the hook, and throwing back blame on 'the Jews'. Pilate is intimidated by Caiaphas, the high priest who was in fact appointed by Pilate and in no position to dictate to his master. The beating the Roman soldiers inflict on Jesus happens in the context of assuaging the vicious Jews, And I understand that the blame-allocating phrase "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matt 27:25) though dropped from the English subtitles, is still actually said in Aramaic. But even if it is dropped entirely the irony is that, in its attempt to appear less anti-Semitic, the film is now less true to the New Testament original, where the Jews are continually derided and vilified. And after Jesus's death, an irate God cracks the Jewish temple in half but only rattles the solver of Pilate's palace.

Then there is the whole question of the influence of the mystic German nun Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), whose posthumously published work *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1833) was an important source for this film. Emmerich's visions were ecstatic, frenziedly mystical, and deeply anti-Semitic. As has been widely reported, Mel Gibson is from the ultra-conservative wing of the Catholic Church, which rejects the (now much watered-down) reforms of the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65. Among the most significant of Vatican II's reforms which Gibson presumably rejects is *Nostra Aetate*, which reversed the hitherto official Catholic dogma that the 'perfidious Jews' bear collective responsibility of the death of Christ. It is then a fairly small step from opposing *Nostra Aetate* to denying the Holocaust, as Gibson's father is on record as having done.

But the essential point to remember in all this is that *The Passion of the Christ* is not simply anti-Semitic in parts, or even that, taken as a whole, it *happens* to be anti-Semitic. *The Passion of the Christ* can be nothing other than anti-Semitic.

To explain this, we need to grasp a couple of important historical points. In true Catholic fashion, the film concentrates on the iconography of the cross. The cross was absent as a

Christian symbol before Constantine. Until then Christian symbols were things like palm branches, peacocks and fish. The cross became the central Christian symbol only after Constantine's vision of the cross in his dream the night before a critical battle. The story goes that Constantine saw the cross and with it came the words "Conquer by this". The next day, he did just that, defeating Maxentius, his rival for the Roman crown.

Why does this matter? Because the cross is a symbol which concentrates on the suffering and death of Jesus, rather than other, more uplifting symbols of resurrection and new life. And inevitably, when focusing on someone's death, attention turns to who is responsible for that death. Enter the Jews. In *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*, an important study of Christian anti-Semitism, the Catholic historian James Carroll put it this way: 'When the death of Jesus – rendered literally, in all its violence, as opposed to metaphorically or theologically – replaced the life of Jesus and the new life of the Resurrection at the heart of Christian imagination, the balance shifted decisively against the Jews.' This is what happened when the cross became the archetypal Christian symbol. If, then, one is going to focus on the cross as a symbol, it becomes practically impossible to avoid some element of anti-Semitism.

Carroll goes so far as to say that there is a discernible line from Golgotha to Auschwitz, and that 'the hatred of Jews has been no incidental anomaly but a central action of Christian history, reaching to the core of Christian character.' Anti-Semitism was a central action of Christian history because Christianity emerged out of Judaism and had to define itself against the people of its birth. The New Testament itself is the brainchild of Marcion (85-160 CE), described by one New Testament scholar as the greatest anti-Semite in antiquity. Marcion wanted to expunge all references to Judaism and Jews and to abandon the Hebrew scriptures. He failed to achieve that, but he did succeed in fashioning the New Testament, which outlined the many faults and iniquities of 'the Jews', regardless of the fact that Jesus himself was Jewish. And once the cross became the central symbol, by extension Jews had to become even more the central enemy than Marcion contrived them to become. And in becoming the enemy of Jesus, the Jews could easily be seen as the enemy of God, for whom no mercy is possible.

So, if a film is going to represent the New Testament faithfully and focus on the iconography of the cross, the real question becomes the more tragic one of 'how could it *not* be anti-Semitic?'

Bill Cooke